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Wednesday, 23 March, 2011 8:19

Dear Grattan & Thos, Here you go. Most of the readers' comments are fairer to the Irish Travellers than I expected, certainly far less offensive than the readers who commented on a piece (on Gypsies, not ITs) that I did for The Guardian recently. -- David:

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BT: Make life lighter

THE SUNDAY TIMES/ NEWS REVIEW / BY ROD LIDDLE

FEATURES

They're gypsies, yeah, they must be bad

The 300 travellers facing eviction from an illegal site in Essex are under fire from locals and the media. But they are much maligned

MARY Anne McCarthay is worried about what we're going to put in the paper because the gypsies, travellers — or pikeys as they're called locally — always get a bad press. Got hammered by that cow from The Sun during the week and also by the Daily Mail. I suppose it's lucky that she can't read, then.

Mary Anne is nearly 70 and never learnt. Her daughter can't read, either, mind. "Makes it very frustrating," she says, "when you get text messages." According to Mary Anne, nobody over the age of about 15 on this traveller site can read; they never got educated, never went to school. None of them. Not one. Some 90-odd families of Irish travellers on this site and all of them, except the kids, illiterate.

Welcome to the Third World, then — which you can find just off the A129 near Billericay, Essex. The life expectancy of these 300 or so people (or "thousands", as the locals put it) is just a little bit more than you would expect in, say, Chad or Mali.

"It's difficult when you go in the village shop, too, and can't work out whether you're buying shampoo or conditioner. It would be nice to read," the daughter, who won't be named, says. We're talking in their small but pristine chalet, the sofa still covered in polythene, not a speck of dirt anywhere, pictures of Jesus on every wall.

This is Dale Farm, in the village of Crays Hill, which played a starring role in Channel 4's My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. Come the summer you will be hearing a lot more about it. Basildon council voted last week to evict the travellers and bulldoze their semi-static — if something can be semi-static — chalets, huts and caravans. It will cost local taxpayers some £18m for the operation, including the police bill — and they will need the police, given the blood-curdling pledges of unrestrained violence and resistance from the travellers. "Let me tell you this, many limbs will be

broken, believe me. And they will need the fire brigade, many fire engines," says another woman, who also refuses to be named.

The travellers bought the site legally a decade ago, but then started moving in caravans and building chalets without planning permission. The travellers accept that technically they are in the wrong. "But where else are we to go? There are no other sites for us," says Mary Anne. "There is nowhere for us to go."

"Well, how about Ireland?" says Johnny Rogers, tree surgeon, resident of the village for 30 years and not hugely sympathetic to the plight of the travellers. He blames Basildon council — once Labour-held, now Tory — for having failed to sort out the problem years ago. You ask him what the travellers have done wrong, though, and a sort of haze, a mistiness, a vagueness, appears in his argument.

He says one or two travellers would be fine, but not the "thousands" who are there now. You ask why that's a problem and he thinks about it and says the site has become a no-go area for the police. How does he know this? What is it that the travellers have done to demand a police presence? He can't say, except they have a police helicopter bBut he's never had any trouble with them, personally, mind; he's spoken to a couple and they seemed okay. Hasn't been robbed or mugged or burgled.

Just that for some reason he can't quite explain there's simply too many of them, and they shouldn't be allowed to get away with flouting the planning regulations when the rest of us can't.

We don't call them "pikeys" any more, he says, we call them "do-as-they-likeys". This is the real thing that grates; one rule for them, one rule for us, it's not right. On this, he has a point.

And then there's the perception of the travellers, which may or may not accord with reality.

Another local bloke loading stuff into his car says the travellers "don't live by our rules", that they don't live by our conventions, either "such as the convention of paying for things in shops".

Yet the local shop has no complaints about them and the woman behind the counter — "No camera, no press, please. Just leave us alone" — says she's steadfastly opposed to the eviction order, "but then I'm not from around here", she adds, as an explanation. In the pub, a barman says the pikeys sometimes get a bit loud and lairy — imagine that, in a pub — and that if one comes in and sits by himself in a corner the locals cower behind the manager and ask what he's going to do about it, kick him out, come on. They're scared of them. But you ask for evidence of what they've done wrong and it's just well, come on, they're pikeys, you know! Well maybe, and maybe not.

I ask Rogers what he would like to see happen to the land the travellers now occupy, once they're kicked out at public expense. "Just let it return to green belt land as it always was," he says. But in truth that's a little bit disingenuous, too. Green belt land? Sure, after a fashion, technically.

To read the newspaper reports you'd think the travellers had set down in a pristine area of outstanding natural beauty; caravans and excrement where Constable's haywain should be. But Crays Hill is an extremely unlovely slice of Essex/London overspill in flat and boring semi-rural land, half scrub, half pasture, all 1950s service stations and infill building, an incontinent sprawl that will one day join up with Wickford to the east.

The land bought by the gypsies was not a verdant water meadow but a scrap-metal dealer's yard and tyre company premises. It may be the only traveller site in the country to look less awful now than it did when they moved in. In fact, it looks similar to the quick-build pre-fab retirement homes for settled folk in the village.

Back at Dale Farm, the kids are running around dressed up in green costumes because it's St Paddy's Day, as they put it — leotards with "Kiss Me I'm Irish", little green glitter horns and so on. They have the day off school because of this bloke who charmed the snakes, and maybe the travellers, out of Ireland.

Once, the local primary school was mixed between traveller kids and settled kids — but after a year every one of the settled kids was moved out. Gypsy children do badly in school, on average, and the teachers are forced to spend their time helping the fantastically slow ones catch up. I looked up the school on Ofsted and its last report is full of politically correct idiocies: it gets great marks for absolutely everything — except for pupil attainment and pupil attendance, where it gets the lowest marks you can get. So all terrific apart from just those two areas.

You understand, immediately, why the settled parents got their children out. The kids running around Dale Farm are friendly enough, mind; little David and Shakira posing for the camera wondering, grim-faced, if they'll still have a home a few months from now.

Mary Anne McCarthay says she wants to move on, says she yearns to be on the move — brought up in a horse-drawn caravan, met her fella at a fair, doesn't feel right to be settled down. Doesn't feel right to be moved on, either.

Such a cost, to move them, now that councils have seen their budgets slashed. But it's the principle, isn't it, according to the settled locals. Just don't ask too much about what that principle is. END

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